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SUBJECT: MFA CHIEF OF STAFF: SMART ADVOCATE FOR AFGHAN WOMEN

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1.(U) SUMMARY. On September 4, POLOFF and recently hired MFA Chief of Staff Manizha Bakhtary discussed Bakhtary's role as MFA's highest ranking woman and her thoughts on how to strategically advance women's rights in Afghanistan. She favors increasing economic opportunities for women rather than the workshop-centric gender rights approach used by many NGOs. Afghan women particularly in cities are better off now than under the Taliban, she said. She emphasized, however, that many barriers to equality remain, even for educated, professional women. END SUMMARY.

INTRODUCTION

2.(SBU) FM Spanta hired Bakhtary two months ago, and as Chief of Staff, she will exert influence over MFA executive operations. While she has not met overt resistance from MFA colleagues, she is careful to play by the rules imposed on women by a conservative Muslim society. She said that FM Spanta would like to hire more women at the MFA, but he recognizes he would face resistance from other high-ranking MFA officials. According to Bakhtary, there are only three management-level female employees at the MFA. Of the total staff, only 15% are women. She attributed her colleagues' acceptance of her in her current position in part due to the fact that she is the daughter of famous Afghan poet Wasif Bakhtary and also because she is the well-known author of three books.

3.(SBU) Bakhtary is new to government, having a background as an author, journalist, and NGO executive. She still holds a full professorship of journalism at Kabul University. She is considering a future run for Parliament. She characterized running for office in Afghanistan as a political game, and was unsure that she could attract the powerful male backers she needed to win.

BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS

4.(U) Bakhtary noted that women in Afghan cities can walk unaccompanied, drive cars, and go out without a burqa. She expressed frustration, however, with the continued barriers faced by female professionals. In her journalism classes of 50 students, only 10 are women. Of that 10 she expects only one or two to actually work as journalists due to their families prohibiting them from performing essential reporting tasks such as interviewing men and reporting outside of daylight hours.

5.(SBU) Bakhtary commented that even women who hold high-level government positions are often not strong advocates for women's causes. Only a couple of female MPs are active and almost all others follow the lead of male counterparts. Many female MPs lack an educational and professional background that would empower them to act independently. Bakhtary thinks Minister of Women's Affairs Ghazanfar is also an ineffective advocate for Afghan women. Ghazanfar comes from a conservative, fundamentalist family and her background negatively influences her job performance. Specifically, Ghazanfar thinks that it is men's role to delegate certain freedoms to women rather than women having an inherent right to those freedoms.

STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

6.(U) Bakhtary argued that the lack of economic opportunities available to women and the conservative Afghan social structure combine to create an effective barrier for progress on women's rights. She disagrees with how many NGOs try to address women's issues through workshops on gender rights because she believes that for the vast majority of Afghan women, this approach is ineffective. Projects that focus on increasing economic opportunities for women and men have much more potential to improve the lives of Afghan women.

7.(U) Bakhtary said the dearth of women qualified to interpret the Koran and other Islamic texts is also a barrier to changing women's social status. When more women are educated and can authoritatively state what the Koran does and does not say about women, that achievement will be a huge driver for changing society's attitudes towards women.

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8.(U) COMMENT. Bakhtary sees her approach to advancing women's rights as being in tune with the realities of Afghan culture. Bakhtary wishes to partner with Embassy and USAID. Post will include Bakhtary in future Embassy functions and encourages the Department to keep Bakhtary in mind for any relevant international events. END COMMENT.
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